

'Tis the Season for Allergies

28 June 1984

By Dr. Janet Kelly

'Tis the season for bare feet and beeings, picnics and relentless sneezing, daydreaming, and wads of tissues in your pocket.

If this is what spring means to you, you're not alone. Nearly one out of every 13 Americans suffer from the woes of hay fever, otherwise known as "allergies."

What does vary is the allergic response individuals experience. While some folks sneeze and rub their eyes, others will experience wheezing and shortness of breath or a cough. Still others may have a runny nose alone or experience fatigue, headaches and irritability.

What causes the allergic reaction? It is the body's response to certain substances in the environment. When tree pollen is inhaled, for example, the body forms antibodies to the pollen (which is perceived as a foreign substance.) A series of events ensue which lead to histamine release. Histamine is what causes the allergic symptoms a person experiences. While tree pollen makes one person sneeze, others will blow their noses over shrubs, grasses, flowers or spores from

mold.

As if that's not enough, this so-called "springtime" can last from February to January depending on the location. According to the Allergy Foundation of America, there is no true "allergy-free" season in the states.

The next question is what to do. First and foremost, take preventive measures. By eliminating or avoiding irritating allergens, i.e. animal fur, house dust or pollen, the symptoms can be greatly reduced or even eliminated. Some may choose the blooming season to take a vacation to pollen-free areas. Others note that home and automobile air conditioners help alleviate symptoms.

For those allergic to molds, discard damp or musty furniture, pillows and carpets. Any outdoor areas which remain damp should be avoided while anti-mildew sprays can help damp areas indoors.

If feathers are bothersome, replace down sleeping bags and pillows with dacron filled items. For those allergic to fur, removal of the pet isn't always necessary. Avoidance of their sleeping area plus frequent vacuuming may

cause less disruption than the feelings of loss if the pet is removed from the home.

While prevention is the first step, drug therapy may be the second. Antihistamines are probably the most commonly used agent. Why? They block histamine's ability to affect susceptible tissues in the body. Antihistamines are most effective when used routinely and before exposure to the offending allergen. Because a variety of antihistamine are available without prescription, try several brands to see which helps the most while causing minimal drowsiness (a major drawback to their use.)

Some products contain both antihistamines (to combat histamine's affect) and decongestants (which help decrease nasal secretion.) Whichever allergy medication you try, beware of products with multiple ingredients. An effective dose of one or two agents will do more than sub-optimal doses of four drugs. Also, the more drugs, the greater the potential for side effects. Persons with glaucoma, prostate trouble, heart disease and high blood pressure should check with their

health care provider first before using allergy preparations. Your local pharmacist is also an excellent resource for helpful over-the-counter medication advice.

The third and fourth approaches to therapy involve prescription medication and/or immunotherapy (allergy shots.) Although most Americans prefer the quick care approach to their ailments, it is not a panacea. Steroids and decongestant nose drops can be improperly used, causing more nasal congestion, and allergy shots don't work for everyone or for every allergy. However, if you have tried steps one and two without success, professional help may be in order.

For further information, contact your regular health care provider or write the Asthma and Allergy Foundation, 19 West 44th Street, New York, New York 10036.

Dr. Kelly is a board certified family practitioner and Assistant Professor with the Department of Family Medicine at the University of Utah. She has recently opened an office in Heber at 570 E. Center Street.

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